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GERMAN MILITARY GOVERNMENT OVER EUROPE:

ALBANIA

Description

An account of the machinery and methods of German military control in Albania, 1943-44.

1 December 1944

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This study is Part Three, Section Four, I, of the series

GERMAN MILITARY GOVERNMENT OVER EUROPE

the outline of which is as follows:

Part One. Principles and Methods of German Military Government over Europe

Part Two. German Controls in Occupied Europe

I. The German Army in Occupied Europe
II. The SS and Police in Occupied Europe
III. Military and Police Tribunals in Occupied Europe
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VI. Economic and Financial Controls in Occupied Europe
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ALBANIA

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I. ALBANIA

A. INTRODUCTION

Albania was invaded by Italy in the spring of 1939. On 12 April of that year the Albanian Assembly, by ostensibly voluntary vote, offered the Crown of Albania to the Italian King, thereby bringing the country into formal union with Italy. Albania was administered under the authority of the Italian Foreign Office until the capitulation of Italy in September 1943.

German occupation was undertaken immediately after the Italian collapse, under circumstances which favored a loose system of controls. The Albanians had thoroughly hated Italian rule; toward Germany, on the other hand, they had had no cause for hostility; and their relatively primitive country offered little opportunity for economic exploitation. Moreover, Albania's extremely mountainous terrain would have made a total occupation extremely difficult. It was therefore natural for the Germans to initiate a lenient program, designed both to win popular support and to free the occupying forces of the burden of civil administration.

Throughout the occupation, Albania was nominally an autonomous state. The Germans did away with all Italian institutions, recognized Albanian "independence," and posed as the protectors of Albania's ethnic frontiers against "Pan-Slav Communist aggression" and the "imperialism of the Western Allies." Direct control was confined to strategic areas. Playing off one faction against another through indirect manipulation of the political situation, the Germans left the conduct of internal affairs almost entirely in native hands.

Military government in the narrow sense thus did not exist in Albania during the German occupation. The situation

was that of a satellite state which was controlled by (a) diplomatic pressure, (b) organization of a quisling government, and (c) in specific localities, by the presence of German garrisons..

B. THE ORGANS OF GERMAN CONTROL

1. The Army

Units of the German Army began to enter Albania on 9 September 1943, the day the Italian surrender became known. The occupying forces were officially declared to be interested only in protecting Albania, and it was explained that immediate military considerations had made it impossible to go through the "usual formalities" prior to their entry.

Military government in the strict sense was not one of the functions of the German Army in Albania. The whole of Albania and a part of the Montenegrin coast were treated as one military area. Garrisons were established along the Adriatic coast, to guard against a possible Allied landing, and in those inland areas (mainly the larger towns) which were important to the German lines of communication. Outlying areas were penetrated only when counterattacks against a growing partisan movement became necessary. The German troops, which were moved about as conditions demanded (irrespective of national frontiers), varied in number between one and three divisions.

In line with the reorganization of the German military command throughout the Balkan area following the Italian surrender, the occupying troops in Albania fell under the command of Field Marshal Baron von Weichs, tactical commander of the Army Group Southeast (F). The highest military authority on the spot during most of the occupation was the Commander of the 21st Mountain Corps, with headquarters in Tirana.

2. Diplomatic Representation

German control in Albania rested to a large extent on political manipulation carried on by representatives of the German Foreign Office. The highest non-military authority

concerned with German policy in Albania was Dr. Hermann Neubacher, the Reich's plenipotentiary for the Southeast, who appeared in Tirana when the Germans first entered the country in September 1943 and who again visited Albania in February and June 1944.

The highest resident German authority was Dr. Martin Schliep, the Consul General in Tirana, who was promoted to the rank of ambassador in July 1944. Since he had been attached to the German consulate throughout the pre-war period and the Italian occupation, his knowledge of Albanian customs and personalities was presumably of great value.

3. Police

Another key figure was General Fitzthum, commander of German SS and police, who seems to have borne much of the responsibility for actual implementation of the German program. He is known to have engaged in secret negotiations with a number of the native leaders, particularly in the north, where the population was most disposed to collaborate. In late August of 1944 following a visit by Field Marshall von Weichs and a reported quarrel with the local commander, Fitzthum was reported to have assumed both political and military leadership.

The SS and police forces under General Fitzthum were relatively few in number, and were kept in the background during the early stages of the occupation. They were concerned mainly with capturing Allied personnel and keeping the authorities informed of the numerous intrigues of the various Albanian groups.

As the Albanians became progressively less reliable, however, and as guerrilla operations increased, the German police forces were enlarged and engaged in more open activity,

including political arrests, and, in co-operation with German army units, reprisals and destruction of villages.

C. GERMAN DIRECT CONTROLS

1. General Policy

In keeping with Albania's nominal status of independence, German political and economic controls were reduced to the minimum dictated by military necessity. The local press was virtually free from censorship: it was permitted to publish Allied communiqués and to extoll well-known British and American "friends of Albania." The only attempt to influence Albanian education was one designed to enhance Germany's reputation. Following the pre-war practice of offering state-subsidized opportunities for study abroad, both the Germans and the Tirana government granted scholarships to German and Austrian institutions.

In Tirana and other of the more important towns, public gatherings were prohibited and the population was obliged to carry identity cards; but these and more elaborate restrictions, which were imposed later in an attempt to prevent infiltration by the FNC resistance organization, were never effectively enforced. In many rural areas even a simplified local administration was lacking. Despite privileges extended to civil employees, the Tirana government had difficulty in maintaining the services of its own personnel and the Germans made little attempt to back its authority.

2. Strategic Areas

Strategic areas, on the other hand, were placed under strict military control. Working through reliable collaborators, the Germans placed the towns along the Adriatic coast under martial law. Whole villages were summarily evacuated, the more important harbor installations were destroyed, and severe reprisals were threatened for any public disturbance.

3. Economic Controls

Albania's primitive economy had been so gravely disrupted by four years of warfare that the Germans made almost no attempt to exploit the country or to introduce economic controls. On the whole, their economic interests were limited to obtaining sufficient stores of food and gasoline to supply their troops on the spot. Supplies were taken as needed, sometimes for cash, sometimes in return for promises to pay after the war; as the population became more restive, the formality of promising restitution was frequently omitted.

An agreement signed in December 1943, whereby Germany received the right to exploit Albania's military resources in exchange for manufactured goods, was never wholly put into effect because of the rapidly deteriorating military situation. Partly because of transportation difficulties, the Germans did not even attempt to work some of the larger mines. They attempted no reconstruction work beyond the maintenance of the more important roads.

D. GERMAN INDIRECT CONTROLS: THE QUISLING REGIMES

1. The Establishment of the Tirana Government

The central government in Tirana was nominally established by the Albanians themselves, through a series of constitutional steps taken in conformity with Albanian tradition. According to Berlin sources, local authorities declared Albanian independence on 11 September 1943, two days after the Germans had started to enter the country. A speedily created "National Committee" proceeded to choose a "Provisional Executive," which in turn called a National Assembly. The Assembly, implying the possibility of a return of the Zogist regime, formally annulled all legislation passed by the Italians (including the declaration of war between Albania and the Allies). In addition, it chose a four-man Regency Council to rule for the duration of the war, and helped it to form a cabinet.

Apparently under threat of total occupation, the Germans were able to enlist a number of well-known, formerly anti-Fascist Albanians to serve in the Tirana government. Prominent among them was Mehdi Frasheri, Albanian delegate to the League of Nations and one-time Prime Minister under Zog, who became the President of the Regency Council. The Germans were also careful to include a disproportionately large number of representatives from the Kossovo region (a part of Yugoslavia which had been annexed to Albania by the Italians), whose presence served to advertise Germany's endorsement of Albanian territorial aspirations.

A number of key posts were reserved for men upon whom the Germans could rely for full collaboration. Xhafer Deva, the Minister of the Interior, for example, was an openly pro-German Albanian, who was especially active in recruiting for the quisling forces. Both he and the Premier, Rexhep Mitrovitsa, were natives of the annexed (Kossovo)

territory.

Although it actually exercised little control outside the larger towns, the Tirana government was given great nominal freedom of action and all the trappings of independence, including suitable diplomatic representation. The Germans were content to encourage the bitter rivalry between, on the one hand, the various nationalist groups, most of which maintained loose connections with the Government, and, on the other, the left-wing FNC, the only active resistance group in Albania.

2. The Dine and Bicaku Cabinets

By July 1944 the Mitrovitsa government had become almost completely ineffectual, and the FNC was showing signs of outdistancing its rivals. In an attempt to strengthen the nationalist bloc, the Germans promoted the formation of a new cabinet headed by Fiqri Dine, a tribal leader with wide local influence and numerous connections with other nationalist leaders. Dine was apparently promised arms if he would effect a closer union of the nationalist groups in opposition to the FNC.

The Dine government remained in power for only two months. The Germans were unwilling to fulfill their promise to supply arms, fearing that the weapons might be turned against them in a last-minute attempt to win Allied favor. Unable to draw all the nationalists into open collaboration or to oppose the FNC effectively without German arms, the Dine government resigned on 7 September. The Germans were then forced to undertake a more nearly direct form of control. The third and most thoroughly quisling cabinet, headed by Ibrahim Bicaku, never became more than a figure-head, although it nominally remained in power until 26 October 1944. The dissolution of the Bicaku cabinet

occurred during the period of the gradual withdrawal of German troops from Albania. Thereafter the FNC resistance organization assumed full control throughout most of the country.

3. Quisling Police and Military Organizations

The Germans were so successful in widening the breach between the nationalist and the leftist FNC that they were able to rely partially on civil strife in combating resistance. The Balli Kombetar, a nationalist organization which was originally formed as a resistance group, was drawn into collaboration through its close connections in the Tirana government and through effective anti-Communist propaganda. In cooperation with German units, its bands centered their efforts on fighting the FNC.

In addition, the quisling government maintained its own army, gendarmerie, police force, and frontier guard, reorganized under German supervision from former Italian-sponsored formations. The gendarmerie, which was largely recruited from the annexed Kossovo territory by the quisling Minister of the Interior, was particularly active, serving virtually as the Government's storm troopers. In August 1943, in an apparent attempt to increase their effectiveness, the Government placed all its forces under a "General Command of Active Forces" which was directly responsible to the Prime Minister and the Regency Council.

The only Albanian formation under direct German command was the SS Skanderbeg Division, which was ostensibly formed for the purpose of defending Albania's ethnic frontiers, and which in fact was never moved from the annexed Kossovo region. Some 1,500 prisoners of war, natives of the Kossovo territory who had served in the Yugoslav Army, were returned from Germany and pressed into service in this unit. Supposedly

voluntary recruiting took place in Albania proper, and in Kossovo one soldier was conscripted from every family with more than two sons.